

This is America's Last Chance

by Conrad Black

In news terms, it has been a quieter summer than usual, and not remotely reminiscent of invincible summers that presaged a global descent into terrible times, such as 1929 or 1939. There has not even been the sort of flash crisis that brought us all in from the verandas or off the water early to follow president Dwight D. Eisenhower's brilliant invasion of Lebanon in 1958 or the Soviet Bloc's brutal suppression of the Czech pursuit of the chimera of "Communism with a human face" in 1968.

This summer, we really only had the clangorous American presidential campaign to divert us from our comparative leisure. In some ways, it has been the most astonishing of these quadrennial electoral Super Bowls of living memory: an unprecedented mountain of legal and ethical baggage obstructing one candidate, and the other a total outsider to political office, violently opposed to and by the entire political class, including the media, and with a propensity to utterances vastly more self-injurious than some famous gaffes of the past that sank candidacies. An early such incident was when a spokesman for Republican candidate James G. Blaine dismissed the Democrats as the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion" in 1884, enabling Democrat Grover Cleveland to carry New York state and the election by 1,149 votes. (In 1891 as secretary of state, Blaine intervened in the Canadian election and urged Canada to seek annexation, through the pages of the Toronto Star – obviously that didn't fly either). Many readers will remember president Gerald Ford's denial that Poland was a Soviet-dominated country in 1976, and president Jimmy Carter's reference to a "national malaise" in 1979 (of which the chief symptom was shortly judged to be his presence in the White House).

In this election, at least until recently, neither nominee was imaginable as a victorious presidential candidate except in contemplation of the other. However, and as some readers will recall that I suggested might happen, Donald Trump, having sewn up the Archie Bunker vote, the roughly 40 per cent of Americans who hate political correctness, dislike government on principle, own firearms, and have a generally macho view of America, tempered in policy terms by isolationist tendencies; has deposited that vast following, which he richly entertained through the primaries, on the electoral scale. And now he has set out to give enough of the mainstream a comfort level that he is not, himself, temperamentally or stylistically unsuited to the great office he seeks, to tip the balance for him. It is working, as the polls are now about even. However it ends, this is the final stage of a tactical progress of great virtuosity.

Everyone who has followed this campaign will recall the smug conventional wisdom of the Republican insiders and both the conservative high-brow and liberal middle-brow media, and the immense clot of international America-watchers that quadrennially thickens and becomes more vocal each election year. They smugly repeated to each other that Trump was just "building his brand," couldn't attract the votes of more than 20 per cent, then, 30, 40 per cent of Republicans, would be sand-bagged at the convention by the credentials committee, would split his party and trail Hillary Clinton by 30 points. He would be dropped "like a hot rock" (Senate leader Mitch McConnell) by other Republican candidates. He was pandering to violence and misogyny and racism, and was a crackpot and a warmonger.

Those were the trees; there are three whole forests that were generally unnoticed. The public will not stand any longer for the chronic misgovernment produced by the Bushes, Clintons and Obama, each begetting the next: the housing bubble, the Great Recession, 12 million illegal immigrants; a decade of war in

the Middle East, mostly to Iran's benefit, which generated a massive humanitarian crisis; Iran and Russia as putative allies in the shambles of Iraq and as opponents in the adjoining Syrian bloodbath; and doubling the national debt and quadrupling the real money supply in seven years to achieve an economic growth rate of one per cent. The people gave the Congress to Newt Gingrich opposite Bill Clinton, to Nancy Pelosi opposite George W., to John Boehner opposite Barack Obama; they all failed, the presidents and the Congresses. Turning the rascals out didn't produce better rascals. Trump was the only person on offer who wasn't complicit in any of it.

The second forest is that Trump raised the Republican vote in the primaries by 60 per cent. In many swing-states, such as Indiana, his vote equalled that of Clinton and Bernie Sanders combined. Millions of Americans who had given up on the great political charade, jubilantly bought the political incorrectness, a candidate who called Islamic terror "Islamic terror" and did not call the San Bernardino massacre "workplace violence." Trump is now the only person in American history to gain complete control of a major political party from the outside without being a cabinet officer selected by his predecessor or a prominent general.

All concepts of strategy and tactics have wide application and, to use a military simile, Trump's mopping-up of the disaffected vote was like the German army bypassing the Maginot Line of antiquated Bush-McCain-Romneyism, and sweeping the British and northern French armies into the sea at Dunkirk in 1940. The sequel began with the Republican convention, and a sober and unfrighting and syntactically unexceptionable Trump now regales the nation with the unfathomable duplicity and corruption of the Clintons, as the southern march on Paris (Washington) gets underway. (I am not assimilating Trump to the Nazis any more than I am likening Clinton to the semi-fascist defeatists of Philippe Pétain and Vichy; this is

strategy.)

The last forest, still undetected by the commentariat, is that this is the last play for the American political centre. A democratic Marxist, Sanders, pulled Hillary Clinton 60 degrees to the left and still received almost half the primary votes, defeated only by the ex officios as Clinton herself was by Obama in 2008. Sen. Ted Cruz, the Republican runner-up, took 30 per cent of the vote for a far-right program, and most of Trump's supporters were voting for a cultural revolution, though for little policy radicalism apart from the issues of illegal immigration and some trade agreements. The traditional centrists are not a majority in either party or in the country.

If the next president, Trump or Clinton, is not more successful than anyone in that office since Ronald Reagan, the far right or the far left is going to take over the most powerful government in the world in four years. Then the fatuous alarms about Trump being an extremist, as opposed to just a rather coarse candidate at times, will be well founded. There will then be no distinction between woods and trees, and instead of Longfellow's "union strong and great" we will be wandering in his "forest primeval."

Predictions remain hazardous. No serious person would believe Clinton deliberately endangered national security with her emails, or that she was directly suborned, through the Clinton Foundation or otherwise. But her endless falsehoods to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Congress about the emails, and the slow-drying cement of the foundation sleaze that is now up to her waist as she struggles toward the election, can only become more difficult. The Democratic convention was addressed by both Clintons, both Obamas, Joe Biden, and vice-presidential nominee Tim Kaine, who between them represented occupancy of or nomination to 48 years in the official presidential and vice-presidential residences. No previous presidential nominee except Robert Dole was at the Republican

convention, and none was mentioned. The Democrats had a complacent orgy of continuity and the Republicans a celebration of complete change.

For eight straight terms, from 1981 to 2013, either a Bush or a Clinton was president, vice-president or secretary of State, and both families put up candidates for their parties' presidential nominations this year. There has never been anything remotely like such a co-regency in U.S. history, and it is not based on spectacularly good performance in office. Change must come. Trump is not an ideal personification of political change. But anyone who doesn't see what is happening, as Sen. Marco Rubio said when he was bombed in the Republican primary of his home state of Florida by Trump by nearly a million votes, has "failed to see the tsunami."

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